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AUTHOR Spiegel, Lisa A.
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ABSTRACT

The breach between university and public school educators is wide, but can be bridged so that students are not deprived of effective English education. First, public school teachers should acknowledge that university educators are teachers as well, and university educators must tailor their pre-service and in-service classes to meet the needs of public school teachers. Second, public school educators need to recognize that research does indeed relate to teaching, must be willing to try some new and different things, and should pay attention to educational research--or do research. University educators need to make research more accessible and attractive to public school educators. Third, public school educators need to listen to what university educators have to say about English education with the same courtesy they expect from their own students and consider trying some of the suggestions in their classrooms. University educators want public school educators to feel welcome in their classrooms and presentations, and they need to work harder to make them feel welcome, but public school educators must first accept university educators as colleagues. (RS)

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The New Civil War

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English Education: The New Civil War

Lisa A. Spiegel
The University of South Dakota
414 E. Clark Street
Vermillion, SD 57069
605/624-3069

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Running Head: The New Civil War

At my university last week one of my secondary methods students raised her hand and asked, "You're such a good teacher. Why aren't you teaching anymore?" Startled, I looked at her and replied, "What am I doing right now?" She said, "You know what I mean. Real teaching, with real kids."

While I was pondering this, the session was over and as I moved into the hallway I met one of my colleagues who looked at me with a glum expression on her face. "This year," she said, "I'm just going to write a fluffy proposal for the NCTE conference. That's all they want, anyway. No one wants to hear research."

A few days later one of my student teachers went to meet her cooperating teacher. When she returned she told me, "My cooperating teacher said I was to forget everything I've learned in my education classes because it's all worthless information that can't be used in the public school. That's not true, is it?"

Increasingly, I hear these attitudes expressed by public school teachers and those who teach in a university or college setting. It is more than occasional; it is a civil war that scares, depresses, and, more than anything else, angers me. Is there any way we university and public school educators can once more be on the same side and work together after drifting so far apart?

As a middle school educator turned college professor, I am tired of the "us versus them" attitude and would like to present you with this war as I see it, along with perhaps some solutions

for us as well. No, I do not want to lecture you; I want to instead speak colleague to colleague. Although some would say we have many differences of opinion, I think our problems can be divided into three (albeit major) categories.

I think our first battle concerns teaching, and the perception we feel you have of university teaching. For you see, I do teach; I certainly do not go home and nap after my scheduled classes! I am not in the classroom all day as you are, but teaching is not 100% of my job assignment as it is yours; I have other responsibilities as well. I teach real people real things, and I work just as hard as you do writing lesson plans and tests, composing lectures, grading papers, and the like. Teaching is teaching; it does not get any easier or better at my level. My students are just as "real" as yours, and, frankly, the only difference between my students and yours is that mine are bigger--not necessarily nicer or easier to deal with.

Really, the main discrepancy between my classroom and yours is discipline, but I must tell you that asking a group of 40 year old men to quiet down can be a bit daunting at times! However, I bet a lot of you, especially if you have taught for a couple of years, would admit that discipline problems are not a major concern for you, either.

So I do teach, just as you do, and I take the teaching part of my job just as seriously as you take yours. Hearing anything less from you offends me, as it should you if I were to make such a comment to you. I want you to understand that teaching is a

On my part, I need to work harder to make you feel that I understand your own teaching situation and the limitations you face in the public school. I will try harder to tailor the classes you take to be relevant to your situation and needs, but you must be willing to meet me halfway. Please, public school teachers, call us teachers as well.

I feel our second breach concerns educational research. I desperately need to tell you that research does indeed relate to you. Teaching is perhaps the only profession that almost refuses to accept change, even when current methods are failures. Now, think about this for a minute--would you go to your doctor for an operation and insist that the entire procedure be conducted in exactly the same manner as that of 20 years ago? Of course not! But we do that in teaching all the time, for we insist upon teaching the way we were taught or learned because, "It has always been done that way."

But educational research is done in real classrooms, using real teachers and real kids. Real information is obtained, and it is just as reliable and valid as the medical information we trust our lives with every day. Educational research tells us about our classrooms, about our students, about ourselves. It tells us what works, what does not, and why. You should know the current research in your field. You should know the leading researchers and what they have to say. When you attend conferences--better yet, send in a proposal--listen to some of the more research-based presentations. Do not leave as soon as

you learn ideas for lesson plans won't be presented. Please, for the sake of your students, stay and listen and decide if this research relates to your classroom. To say that research is unimportant or irrelevant because you teach is to perfectly miss the point.

Frankly, I challenge you to discover all the new ideas and techniques that your field has to offer--new does not mean bad or ineffective. It scares me to think that I know more about the intricacies of the language arts classroom than many of you. I visit public schools frequently with my student teachers, and more than anything else I see endless grammar sentences, five-paragraph themes, writing separated from reading, papers traded and graded in class, term papers assigned too early, the classics, and all sorts of other things that we--and you, too--know do not work or are unsuitable for your grade level. But you do them, day after day, year after year, and then you complain when your students cannot read or write or think or be creative. Please, study the research. Discover how exciting English can be when it is taught well.

So please, help us to help you. Read the research, do some of your own, call us with your questions. Remember, the reason we conduct research is to aid you and ourselves in both our classrooms. Research is for students, not egos.

Of course, on our part, we need to make the research more accessible and attractive to you. We must not condescend if you are unsure of statistical, or other, matters. We must show you

how research specifically relates to your classroom and what you can do to make these ideas work. We need to provide you with real, practical ideas and steer you away from the radical, unproven and impossible. We need to make it safe for you to try new things, and I know we have not always done a good job in making you feel comfortable in the past. But you must be willing to accept--and stick with--some of the new and throw out some of the old. Please, public school teachers, be willing to give some new and different things a chance and become reacquainted with a very important aspect of your field.

Sadly, I think the third breach is our largest one, one that will take a long time to make right again. But it absolutely must be done. You see, we also want to be treated with respect. If I had all the chips taken from your collective shoulders during an in-service, I could retire now and win big at Vegas! You people are a tough audience--and rightly so--but you expect magic from us and when you do not get it, you dismiss us. Listen again, and remember we are trying to help you, motivate you, inform you. We, like you, cannot reach everyone every time, but we try.

Your students have about the same attitude towards you that you have for us--it is not much fun sitting in the student's desk, is it? Sometimes, you pass notes and engage in conversation during our presentations while we are speaking! I doubt you would accept this behavior from your own students for very long, would you? Please, listen to what we have to say with

the same courtesy you expect from your own students and consider trying some of our suggestions in your room. If you are not willing to try our ideas, then do not complain about us!

Remember, because some of our ideas may not work for you does not mean we can not work for you; do not kill the messenger!

Moreover, please do not complain that our teaching is not stellar when you are not performing well in your own classrooms. You demand we be master teachers, and I agree, but so should you. If you try something and it does not work, come back for more. Tell us your situation and what you need. We are on the same side, you know.

There are no ivory towers anymore; remember, we really are just like you. We have all taught in your classrooms and we remember very well what it was like. We teach at a different level now not because we were public school failures, but because we envisioned a different career path for ourselves. Not better, or more important, just different. We have worked long and hard for our degrees and certainly do not feel they are irrelevant. We feel that you only want to listen to those who are currently teaching in the public school, or that there has to be some magic cutoff of experience that makes us relevant to you. How many years does one have to teach before they can write a good lesson? Supervise lunch duty? Discipline students? We think that good teaching is the same, regardless of the grade level or years spent in a certain grade. We want you to know that good teaching is more than unit plans and creative assignments; it is knowing

your field and its people inside and out. It is also wanting to improve your teaching and share with others. Trust us, for we know--and truly care--so much more than we are given credit for. Really.

Sadly, I realize that you may feel intimidated and perhaps even inferior by some of us, although you should not. I, and most of my colleagues, truly despise that attitude. We want to make our graduate classrooms places for sharing and exploring, rather than recitation with one teacher and 30 captive learners. We are all both teachers and learners. We want you to feel welcome in our classrooms and presentations, and we will work harder to do so, but you must first accept us as the colleagues we truly are.

Radical changes? Impossibilities? Pipe dreams? I think not; I think I am really speaking more towards accommodation of each other moreso than anything else. The breach between us is wide; I do not want to see it become wider, and I am sure you feel likewise. We, too, want this war ended. Please, public school teachers, let us come back: we want to be part of your family again. There is plenty of room for both of us in our profession; to deny the other a place is to essentially deny our students access to what we know and love best: English education.